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He obtained a Master degree in Bioscience Engineering (1990) and in Urbanism and Planning (1992) at Ghent University. His PhD in Engineering in 2007, also at Ghent University, dealt with dominant and alternative planning discourses on agriculture and open space in the urbanised context of Flanders. He has commuted between academic research at Ghent University (1992-1996, 2002-2010) and policy making and management at the Flemish Government (1996-2002, 2010-2014).

Since October 2014, he is assistant professor at the Faculty of Architecture - Campus Ghent, teaching planning policy, ecology and sustainability and research in planning in the Master of Urbanism and Spatial Planning and the international Master of Architecture. He is doing research on planning policy, planning instruments and ecological issues at the Department of Architecture.

Research on planning discourses about the physical living environment

Research on planning and on planning policy is not at all exact science. It deals with people, political decision making, power relations, norms and standards. As a consequence, there is no unique answer to the main ambition of planning to make society, for its own sake, evolve towards the best mutual adjustment between space and society. The mission of planning is thus to tell future-oriented stories that help people imagine and create sustainable places. Planners want to convince politicians and citizens to act differently by telling persuasive stories about the future spatial development of society.

Planning discourses

The 'story telling' refers to social constructivist theories in political science and public management science about the relationship between society and physical reality. These theories consider reality and space as social constructs ... or, described in a different way, these theories claim that ideas about reality are being developed in a constant struggle of power relations and knowledge fields in space and time. As a consequence, a specific way to approach a problem or challenge politically can suddenly become much more important. It can even become dominant while other ways of approaching the same problem or challenge can become discredited. As 'space' is a dimension of reality, it can also be considered as a social construct. This makes it very interesting to assess the rise and fall of planning approaches with the same methods as political scientists do, namely through discursive analysis. A planning discourse is then a more or less coherent ensemble of ideas about the spatial organisation of society that is being constructed and reconstructed in an interaction between researchers, planners, designers, policy makers, politicians and interest groups. Three elements are essential in the development of a policy discourse:

- the creation of a story line that enables actors to combine notions, categories and story lines from very different policy domains through which they give meaning to specific physical and social phenomena;
- the development of a discourse coalition, actively connecting independent policy practices by gathering them along the same story line;

- the institutionalisation of a discourse when the story line and its discourse coalition are implemented into policy practices, legislation and reforms of governmental organisation.

Eventually, a policy or planning discourse becomes dominant when individuals lose their credibility when they do not use the ideas, concepts and categories of the dominant discourse. Changes in policy are only possible if a dominant policy discourse is questioned successfully.

Planning research in relation to planning discourses

It is essential at the start of each research project on planning or planning policy to reflect on these three elements. The objectives of a research project can for instance focus on one element and, consciously or unconsciously, ignore the two others. Especially when the research is done in a policy context, when a government administration is the client, it is vital to critically assess why elements are missing and whether or not they can be included in the research. When it appears impossible or difficult to discuss this subject, it reveals the political context in which the research project is to be done.

A nice illustration is the dominance in current planning policy to primarily opt for the development of new procedural legislation so that political decision making becomes faster, easier and less contested in court. This absolute preference for a legal solution to socio-spatial challenges shows a lasting and increasing belief in the engineerability of society. Where planning has always believed that the material spatial organisation of society can be engineered through blueprint plans, this belief now even extends to the process dimension of planning: also the political and societal processes, in which decision making on the development of space takes place, are now captured by engineerability. It also implies that nearly every research project on planning and planning policy is expected to address at least the procedural and instrumental dimensions, in other words the element of institutionalisation. The alignment with or the creation of a story line seems of minor importance.

This is quite strange since the existing 'spatial' story line of planning is increasingly being questioned. The Flemish Government no longer has a minister of spatial planning but a minister of environment as a result of the merge of 'environment' and 'spatial planning'. A shift from 'spatial planning' to a more inclusive 'planning of the physical living environment', taking also into account mobility, health, heritage and other issues, needs a more radical change however.

Planning of the physical living environment

Life on Earth is confronted with life determining challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, global food supply and increasing health problems. These challenges do not allow for the familiar environmental impact assessment at the end of the pipe anymore. Economic, residential or infrastructural development options in a policy plan for the living environment have to take the space determined by environmental and health standards as a starting point. Solely within this determined space, spatial and other quality ambitions can determine where and how residential and infrastructural developments are possible. Planning a new east-west road infrastructure in Antwerp for instance should not start from a technical trajectory that has to be complemented by means of tree rows, shoulders or noise reduction screens to mitigate its environmental impact on the urban tissue.

No, in an environment policy approach, environmental quality and health issues determine the space in which planners can look for the integration of the road infrastructure. If it appears impossible to do so, real political decisions have to be made: the removal of the existing urban tissue, another trajectory for the infrastructure or the choice not to build a new infrastructure but a roof on top of the existing ring way. As a member of the Department of Architecture, I feel the obligation to do this kind of research on planning and policy making for the environment in all its aspects.

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